The Wells Family

and the Early Years of Old Sturbridge Village

David M. Simmons

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Old Sturbridge Village
1 Old Sturbridge Village Rd.
Sturbridge, Massachusetts 01566
www.osv.org

Accredited by the American Association of Museums

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The Wells Family, 1920

Left to right, back row: Ethel B. Wells, Albert B. Wells, Mary McGregory Wells, Irene K. Wells, Alfred Turner Wells, Mary Wells Phinney, Channing McGregory (Gregory) Wells, Jr., John M. Wells, J. Cheney Wells
Left to right, seated: Elizabeth Wells, Channing M. Wells, Florence Wells, Mary Elizabeth Phinney, Florence M. Wells, Gertrude Wells, George B. Wells, Henry Cady Wells, Mason B. Wells

Foreword

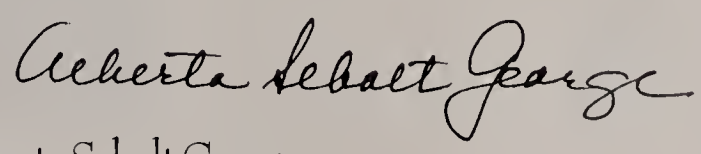
Over a half century ago, Old Sturbridge Village was founded as an experiment in outdoor living history. Today the Village is a dynamic model of what is typically an American style of museum — open, engaging, educational, and entertaining.

Old Sturbridge Village has also taken its place as a significant regional presence and an equally important part of the cultural landscape of this nation. Recognized among the top ten percent of museums in the country, the Village has achieved the rigorous standards of national accreditation for more than four decades.

Focusing on the lives of ordinary people living in an era of important change, our extraordinary museum preserves the rhythms and values of earlier times. In our 200-acre living classroom, visitors of all ages make personal discoveries and meaningful connections between their own lives and those of early New Englanders.

It is due to the extraordinary efforts of one exceptional family that we owe all these things. The passionate collecting interests of the Wells family and their commitment to preserving the nation's history gave birth to our museum. Their expansive vision focused on the importance of education as a matter of both learning for life and lifelong learning; today we serve more than 100,000 student learners each year and offer every visitor to the Village the opportunity to experience hands-on history — the joy of ongoing education. In a society like ours, with tremendous hopes, expectations, and respect for education, the Village will play an even more important role in transforming education in the 21st century.

We are grateful for an amazing staff, who have taken this institution to bold new horizons. As David Simmons weaves his tale of our museum's early years, he brings to life the wonderful relationship of the many parts that have gone into the creation of this astonishing public monument to the American story. His hope is to capture the passions and commitment of those who set our course. Our hope is to honor their lead by catching a glimmer of their vision with renewed passion and commitment of our own.



Alberta Sebolt George
President, Old Sturbridge Village

Old Sturbridge Village was born of the impulse to share with the public the burgeoning collections of two New England industrialists, Albert B. (A. B.) and Joel Cheney (J. C. or Cheney) Wells. A leader among collectors, A. B. had a preference for the "simple things — the often unrecognized objects that made up the fabric of daily life and activity in the past and represented the skills and inventiveness of the early 19th century."[1] Cheney, in contrast, had amassed a significant collection of early American clocks and timepieces. Their brother, Channing M. Wells, was himself a collector of fine furniture. Known as the "triumvirate," the Wells brothers were successful owner-executives of the American Optical Company (A. O.), headquartered in Southbridge, Massachusetts.

Joel Cheney Wells, Albert Bacheller Wells, Channing McGregory Wells

George Washington Wells, father of Channing, Albert, and Cheney, had been one of the incorporators of the A.O. in 1869, consolidating three local "spectacle shops." He brought his sons into the business early in their careers, and each made the company his life's work. Born on a farm in South Woodstock, Connecticut, in 1846, George W. Wells "lacked formal education, but

. . . had a natural dignity and standard of conduct, ethics and morals that is not found too often today," as his grandson George B. Wells (son of A. B.) noted in 1965. George Washington Wells was imbued with a sense of "frugality, hard work, and a willingness to stand for principle," the heritage of a long New England lineage. Instilled with these "ever guiding forces in the family," Channing, Albert, and Cheney helped guide the growth of the American Optical Company from its modest beginnings to become one of the largest optical manufacturers in the world.[2]

"The close family relationship of a group of farm boys running a company created a standard of business performance and ethics that is seldom equaled," noted George B. Wells. "That, I believe, resulted in the unusual reputation enjoyed by the American Optical Company during this period and in later years."[3] The Wells brothers' close working relationship and strength of character also combined to forge a new institution, Old Sturbridge Village — which, similarly, has distinguished itself as a leader among world-class museums of history.

George Washington Wells
1846 – 1912

In late November 1948, the esteemed landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff wrote to his longtime friend Albert B. Wells: "It's hard for us to realize that the present active interest in restoring old places and things is in its early youth here in the U.S.A. Fifty or one hundred years from now many intelligent persons will

Albert B. Wells, 1939

be wondering how your restoration of Old Sturbridge started and kept going and going, always directed by your hand. You are the ideal man to write that history, especially if you dictate it just as you write your interesting and full-of-vitality letters."[4]

The following month, A. B. began to recount his story, dictating two letters to Arthur's wife, Margaret. While his inimitable style shines ever brightly, the correspondence seems to have been short-lived — only two letters survive. Yet in these rich accounts, elsewhere in his remarkable correspondence, and in the letters and accounts of other family members and associates — preserved in the Old Sturbridge Village archives — we may glean a better appreciation of the very early history of the Village, which touches so closely upon the Wells family. The story of the early development of Old Sturbridge Village is grounded in the closeness of family and a deep love and respect across generations, in thoughtful planning and tremendously hard work, in the love of antiques, and in steadfastness of purpose. It is, in the end, an inspiring story of an extraordinary vision brought to life.

Daniel H. Burnham in Evanston, Illinois

"In 1900 I married Ethel Burnham," A. B. wrote to Margaret.

> "Her father was D. H. Burnham, the architect who, with his partner, [John Wellborn] Root, undertook the architectural and supervisory work of building the first World's Fair in Chicago in '93. . . . I had the advantage of his advice — not on any specific purpose, but on his general outlook of life. I have always had, in my own room, a little piece of advice in black and white, given me by Mr. Burnham. . . . From that time on, all my life, I have kept what he said in my mind. 'Make no little plans,' etc. I worshipped that man and I could tell you a lot about our association together. He wanted me to join his firm and I refused. I said I had never worked for but one man and I would never work for any other; and that was my own father. I had never been associated with any other man except my father and my brothers and that I was going thru life that way and I did."[5]

The Wells clan was a particularly close-knit group. "The Wells brothers . . . even had a joint bank account until they were grown men," recalled A. B. Wells' daughter-in-law, Ruth Wells. "I remember my mother-in-law saying more than once, 'Albert, I believe you love Cheney more than you do me.'"[6]

But the Wellses and the Burnhams also shared in each other's lives in memorable ways. D. H. Burnham fished in Sturbridge's Walker Pond, maintained a strong friendship with family patriarch George Washington Wells, whom he described to Albert as "a winner,"[7] corresponded with Cheney, and provided help and advice to Channing.

The Wells Family, c. 1910

Left to right, back row: J. Cheney Wells, Albert B. Wells, Channing M. Wells, Frank Phinney
Left to right, seated: Ethel B. Wells, Henry Cady Wells, Florence M. Wells, Mary Wells Phinney, George W. Wells, Mary McGregory Wells, Channing McGregory (Gregory) Wells, Jr., Mason B. Wells, Irene K. Wells
Left to right, front: John M. Wells, George B. Wells, Alfred Turner Wells

Albert and Ethel and their son, George, visited the Burnhams in Evanston, Illinois. On one occasion when Albert stayed behind in Southbridge, D. H. Burnham wrote to his "Dear Son" back East: George "sits on my knee at breakfast every morning, as he is accustomed to do with you when at home. He is the light of the house. Yours lovingly . . . ." The close bond between Albert and his father-in-law was mirrored in the next generation in the special relationship that evolved between George's wife, Ruth, and her father-in-law, Albert — known to each other as Rufus and Gramps — and to Ethel, her mother-in-law, who was moved to tears when Ruth began referring to her as an "adopted mother."[8]

The Burnham Family in Evanston, c. 1905

Left to right, seated: Margaret S. Burnham, Daniel H. Burnham, Ethel Burnham Wells, George B. Wells
Left to right, standing: Ethel's siblings, Daniel, Jr., John, Margaret, and Hubert

Albert and Ethel also traveled extensively with the Burnhams in Europe on several occasions between 1907 and 1912. "Daniel H. Burnham was one of the grandest men I ever knew," A. B. remembered. "He was a wonderful man to travel with. He was the man who built the first steel office building in the United States, or in the world. One day, when we were in Pau, France, we stood at the entrance of a small court and he said, 'Albert, can you see the building that inspired me to build an office building, a steel office building?' It wasn't directly in front of you, kind of off to the left, and it stood out just like the nose on your face. He was an inspiring individual."[9]

In his travels, Albert also had the opportunity to see not only Europe's architectural treasures but also its landscapes and cityscapes through D. H. Burnham's eyes. "I'll never forget my first trip to England and Regent Street, and certainly I'll never forget driving around and looking at the beautiful skylines in Paris. I also had that opportunity in many other places with Mr. Burnham," he dictated to Ruth in 1948. In carefully creating the New England townscape of Old Sturbridge Village, Albert acted upon these special memories. Discussing the location and massing of the Village's buildings, he remarked: "I think that skyline is almost of paramount importance."[10]

Daniel and Margaret Burnham with Albert and Ethel Wells on their last motor trip together in Europe, 1912

D. H. Burnham also guided Albert and Ethel through Europe's castles, cathedrals, and museums. But as a young man, Albert didn't like museums. "There are a lot more things for a young person to do than looking at things that were used one hundred or a thousand years ago," he commented. "They are frightfully dead. . . . When I was a youngster, you couldn't pull me into a Museum with a pair of irons to say nothing about a pair of horses." Mr. Burnham "did get me into a museum, and he did get me interested in a good many things that I saw," he continues. "But it was like pulling teeth and I'd only stand it about so long."[11]

Ethel and Albert accompanied her parents on their last trip to Europe during the spring of 1912. Burnham wrote to Albert in February of that year, entrusting to his care the booking of passage on "the Olympic or the Titanic, either going or coming. . . . Just go ahead and use your own judgment." Albert chose the Olympic and they made safe crossing. But on their European journey, Daniel Burnham, who had not been well, died in Heidelberg. Albert cabled the home office of Burnham and Root in Chicago, and the world learned of the death of one of America's great architects. "He was taken away . . . at the age of 66. Wasn't it funny that my father died that same year and exactly the same age?" Albert later mused. Albert regretted that in the genesis of Old Sturbridge Village, Daniel Burnham "couldn't help us, even with his advice." Yet, A. B. had been well-tutored by this grand master of architecture and city planning and had traveled in Europe with such other luminaries as the landscape planner Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the architect Charles McKim (of the esteemed firm of McKim, Mead, and White). All of their contributions to his aesthetic philosophy would, in fact, be borne out in the deliberate creation of Old Sturbridge Village by his own hand.[12]

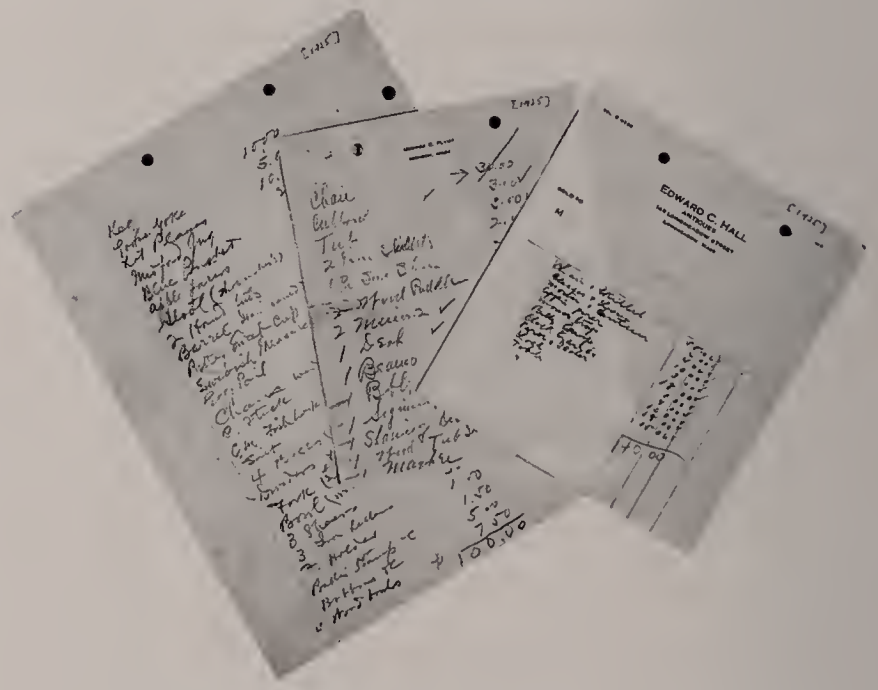
Albert's earliest documented encounter with antiques, in fact, went back to his travels with the Burnhams. "I remember so well being in Edinburgh with my wife and her father and mother," he recalled to a collector friend in 1945.

> "They were sightseeing, and we had an appointment to meet some people up at the Castle, and in the meantime I skipped out with the chauffeur, drove up the hill, toward the Castle where I had seen an Antique shop, and went in. A nice little old Scotchman came in and said 'Can I do anything for you?' 'Well,' I said, 'I'd just like to browse around, I'm particularly interested in old wrought iron.' 'Wrought iron,' he said, 'You come with me.' And we went down in his basement and if there was one ton there, there were five or six tons of miscellaneous wrought iron. I never saw such a sight in my life. He asked me if I'd mind telling who I was, etc. and I told him I came from Massachusetts, my name was Wells, and that I was a hit-or-miss collector and had been picking up quite a little wrought iron because I appreciated the hours of work that had gone into it. . . . 'Now, I'm not strong enough to handle this,' [he said] 'but if you'd like to paw it over and pick out what you'd like and put it in a pile, I guess we can make a deal.' Well, I worked there all afternoon, I'll bet I moved a ton of iron. Anyway, when I got thru I was a mess. Finally, I went upstairs and he came down and looked at the pile and said, 'Well, Mr. Wells, what do you think it is worth?' I told him I had so many pieces there, I'd kept track of them, and he could see pretty well what it was, and I made him an offer. It was a ridiculous offer, very likely, and he said 'I think that is too much.' 'No,' I said, 'I think it is worth that much to me.' So he said, 'Well, it's yours.' So I sent for a dray for it, had it boxed, sent it to London, and sooner or later it came to Southbridge, Mass. Well I could go on and tell story after story of buying that way."[13]

Albert had become interested in collecting antiques through a friend, E. C. (or Ned) Wheeler, Jr., whom he knew from his days at Harvard. Wheeler, as A. B. remembered, "picked up what I called, at that time, oddities and have since called primitives."[14] While A. B. shared a love for fine English antique furniture with his brother Channing, he "began to collect American household furniture and equipment in great numbers about 1924 or 5," noted Ruth Wells.

> "The story goes that he and some friends were in a golfing weekend in Manchester, VT. The first day it was pouring rain so golf was out. The friends were all antiquers and so they said to Albert, 'Come along with us, we'll show you some really good shops.' Albert demurred at first, saying that he couldn't see what they saw in those old junk shops. The antique shop in Henniker, New Hampshire, was one that was filled with just the things that A. B. learned to cherish and to buy in great quantity. They were the churns and corers, the ladles and bowls and every manner of household utensil. He fell in love with them then and there and bought so much it took two beach wagon loads to bring it to Southbridge."[15]

"When the bug bit me it certainly bit me hard, because generally my outside limit was $2 and I bought thousands and thousands of pieces that cost a good deal more," A. B. recounted to a fellow collector, Charles F. Brown, in 1945.



Receipts for A. B. Wells' antique purchases, 1920s

"As I have told you over and over again, all the pleasure, as I look back on my collection, has been in the trading and the buying," A. B. wrote to a collector friend in April 1945. "The feeling of possession doesn't interest me at all. I am always glad to see other things, but hate to go and see them because I can't trade for them in Museums, etc. etc."[16]

He was enamored of "the little things that made life livable 100 to 150 years ago. . . . This accumulation of 'junk,' as most of my family call it, gradually filled up our Main Street house." A. B., himself, wavered in his own description of his collections: "I remember when I first began to collect things I called them primitives and my son said to me . . . 'Well, are your antiques primitives?' 'No,' I said, 'I'll stop using that word and I'll call them oddities but perhaps once in a while there is a primitive.'" Whether they were "oddities" or "primitives," they kept arriving, and the already substantial house continued to grow to keep pace with A. B.'s collecting appetite. By 1927, an ell was added containing a "great room" built of barn timbers and sheathed with weathered boards. This space held a special significance for A. B., who used it as a place to entertain friends and gather the family. Another wing was added in 1930. Later, A. B. took the two bowling alleys he and his brothers had built — where "we used to bowl a great deal, after 5 PM and I tried to hold my end up with the youngsters, they kept me stepping I can tell you" — and partitioned them off "to make bays for different kinds of antiques."[17]

Great Room, Albert B. Wells Home,
176 Main Street, Southbridge, Massachusetts, December 30, 1927

The Wells Historical Museum's first curator, Malcolm Watkins, described his first view of the room in 1936 as "a great beamed room . . . . There were antiques everywhere, a mixture of English bygones and rural Americana. Chandeliers hung from the rafters, and all sorts of fascinating objects were around."[18]

Wells family holiday gathering in the Main Street Great Room, 1927

A. B. continued to collect with near abandon. "I have about given up trying to buy from dealers," he wrote to a collector friend in 1932. "I don't think dealers charge too much, but the ones who travel from house to house and attic to attic, and backs up to your house with a Ford truck loaded, will make you prices that a dealer couldn't possibly meet. I have two or three of these fellows stop in to my place every week, and I have a gorgeous time buying. ...Somehow or other

View of A. B. Wells' Iron Collection in the Main Street bowling alley

In 1945, A. B. recalled the time when he took Wallace Nutting down to the bowling alley to see the iron collection. "'Why,' he said, 'Mr. Wells, there isn't anything like this in the world.' 'Oh, yes, Mr. Nutting, you see I have a good place to get it altogether.' And when you have 150 running feet of walls practically covered with wrought iron, you make people think you have an awful lot."[19]

I can't stop buying, especially at the present time. Never saw such values," he continued. "I've spent an awful lot of money this summer," wrote A. B. to another acquaintance in 1936, "but I hate to stop buying because it seems to me that each year I have been able to pick up more interesting things than the year before."[20]

In 1944, A. B. wrote to another collector: "I have had more fun in buying antiques than any other pleasure that has been in my lifetime excepting perhaps being pretty actively engaged in a pretty active business. For real pleasure, you certainly have it when you are looking for something, finding it, and buying it at a price you can afford to pay." It was a love that he carried with him till the end of his days: "When I write to you about antiques, I go nuts," A. B. penned in 1947 to his dear friend, fellow collector and Old Sturbridge Village advisor, Russell ("Rusty") Kettell.[21]

While his collecting provided immense personal pleasure, A. B. was dogged by self-doubt, engendered by the disdain of some "mainstream" collectors of fine and decorative arts who misunderstood his focus on everyday objects. "It wouldn't take you long to size me up and find out that as a collector I am rather a flop," he wrote to a collector friend in 1945. "I just had a hunch that I'd enjoy doing it, and I could afford the hobby, and I went at it. I have been so criticized by collectors and their ideas," he lamented. A. B. was so afraid of the potential derision of the estimable members of the Walpole Society, a small and highly select group of American collectors, that when the Society planned a Village visit in September of 1941, he and Cheney sent to each

Antique-filled Main Street house, 1930s

A. B. Wells *(to right of doorway, wearing hat)* in front of the Fitch House with members of the Walpole Society when they visited the Village in September 1941

member a "pretty good explanation, as to just what, according to our lights at that time, we were trying to do." "I think it had a good effect," A. B. recalled to Ruth years later. "From the time Harry DuPont [Henry Francis DuPont, founder of the Winterthur Museum] came to Sturbridge, he and Lockwood [Luke Vincent Lockwood, another notable collector] . . . just hung onto me, and they were very complimentary." A. B. was pleased to hear DuPont call down to Chauncey Nash (Chauncey Cushing Nash, dealer and collector) in the presence of several other members: "Nash, we should not have come to Southbridge for one day, we should have had at least two days or three days. They have a wonderful collection here." A. B. had also been equally gratified by the response of Israel Sack, one of the most prominent American

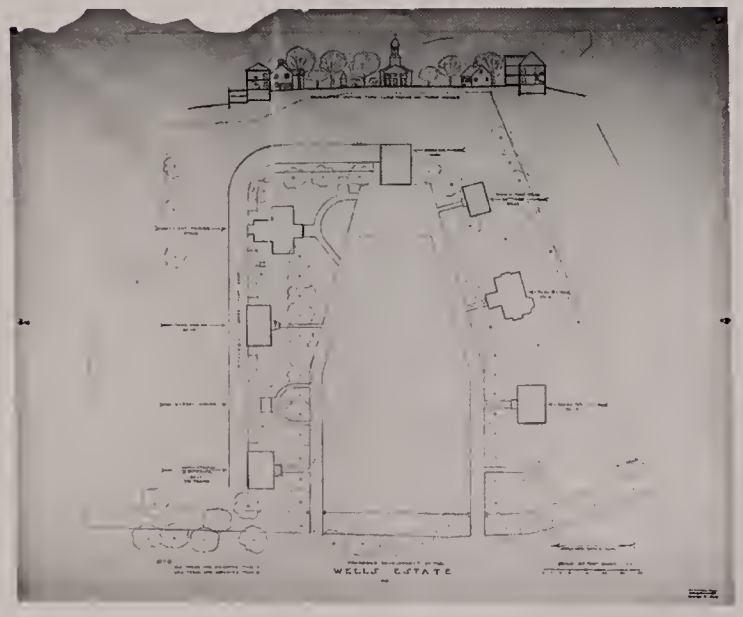
collector / dealers of his time, who visited several times during 1936. "He is very enthusiastic about my collection," A. B. wrote in September of that year.[22]

"I felt that I couldn't and didn't want to dream and feel that in a few years, if I passed away, that these collections would be entirely disposed of and spread here and there all over the world,"[23] recalled A. B. in 1948. Thus, in 1935, A. B.'s collection became the nucleus of the Wells Historical Museum, whose incorporators included A. B., his son, George, and nephews Turner, John M., and Gregory Wells, as well as executives from the American Optical Company.

Lighting collection, Wells Historical Museum, c. 1935

"I agree with you about the future and another generation — two more generations," wrote A. B. to Margaret Shurcliff in December 1948. "These old things, if they can be kept together, are invaluable. They will tell lots of lessons and lots of history."[24]

"When Aunt Ethel and I made up our minds that we were out of the Main Street house for good we began to plan what we were going to do with the antiques eventually," A. B. wrote to another nephew, Henry Cady Wells (Channing's son), in 1940. "I felt that it was my duty to supply a certain revenue to this Museum and then we created the Museum and we had a board of trustees, and when the board met" in July 1936 to determine the future course of the Museum, "I was asked to tell my story. My story was to use the Main Street property, the property of your grandfather and grandmother, and Uncle Cheney and me. Build a little street there in the shape of a horseshoe . . . and the inside a kind of a little park. Well, it sounded pretty good and there were two plans made. . . . Well, it didn't sound so good to the trustees, and George combed my hair."[25]



Plan for exhibition buildings to display the collections of the Wells Historical Museum on Main Street in Southbridge, prepared by architect Joel Chandler in 1936

"It is so fortunate that we broke away from your and my original talks about doing something there on Main Street, and when George proposed the possibility of a Village, it didn't require any large amount of selling to either of us, I am sure," J. C. wrote to his brother A. B. in January 1949. [26]

A. B. continued, in a more expansive version of the story in 1943:

> "George said, in a nutshell, that a museum was a dead thing. There was no interest in it whatsoever except by a lot of old fogies like myself and the people of my vintage, and that nobody ever went into museums but old people. He then pointed out the fact that the historical value of the

things I'd been collecting was tremendous, provided it could be put to proper usage and used educationally to help the children who were in existence and those who would come into existence in the years to come. He suggested that to make this material valuable, it would be necessary to have a village, a live village, one with different shops operating with the employees which were then available, who would know how to use the old tools, the old methods, etc., etc. It was essential to have water power because in 1800 or thereabouts everybody took their corn to the gristmill, and they had to go to the blacksmith shops, take their lumber to a sawmill, and on and on as long as you want to go. This was a revolutionary idea as far as I was concerned, and I was taken off my feet. So was my brother Cheney, and Cheney said at that very meeting, 'Albert, if you accept George's idea, I'll go in with you 50-50 and help you in every way I can to develop a village along the lines

J. Cheney Wells
1874 – 1960

that George suggests.' Well, inside of a week we had bought the property at Sturbridge. . . . We really started to work then, together hand-in-glove, as we had through forty-odd years at the American Optical Company."[27]

And, in an amplified 1948 account, A. B. recalled Cheney's commitment of his collections as well: "I will put my clocks and paperweights into your collection and whatever other items that I have that would be useful in a village."[28]

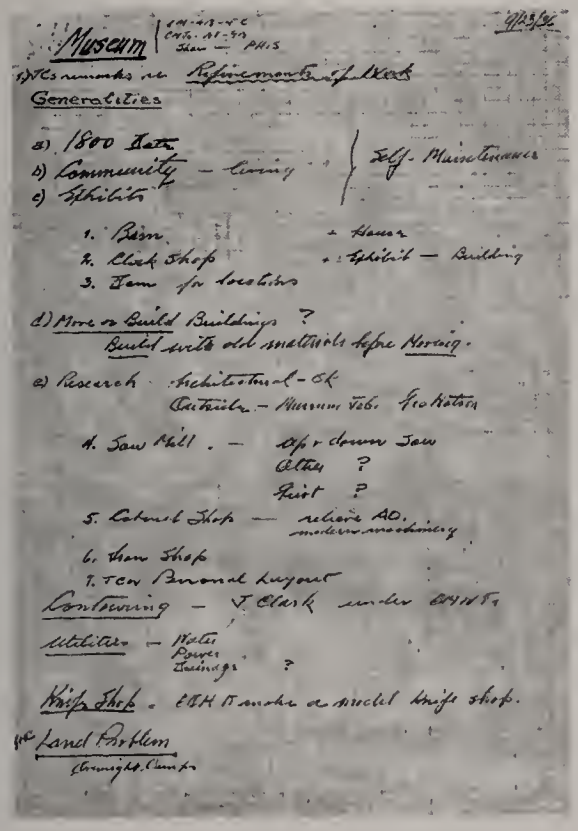
To implement this plan, Albert and Cheney purchased a 160-acre farmstead nestled along the Quinebaug River in Sturbridge, which possessed the meadows, wooded hills and water-power needed for such a living village. They already knew the property since it had once belonged to their sister, Mary, and her husband, Frank Phinney. Within the year, they acquired an adjoining parcel that included the Oliver Wight House and land now occupied by the Old Sturbridge Village Lodges. The Wight house had been the birthplace of their mother, Mary McGregory Wells. "Thus," as A. B. and Cheney wrote together in 1941, "both nature and history justify the Village's location."[29]

Mary Eliza McGregory Wells
1847 – 1924

"By this time I think we had realized that we had bit off quite a chunk and had to have help and advice," A. B. later recalled. Within days of the first acquisition, George Wells wrote to an acquaintance, John D. Rockefeller III: "Will you please forgive my impertinence . . ." he began. "My father, Mr. Albert B. Wells, is engaged in a restoration undertaking locally; while by no means as expensive, in many ways resembling the work your father did in Williamsburg, Va. Consequently, we should appreciate any assistance you could give us in selecting architectural and engineering advice in this undertaking." Rockefeller's response was a forceful endorsement of the firm that had from the beginning directed all of the work at Williamsburg: Perry, Shaw & Hepburn of Boston.[30]

When the firm's three partners first visited Southbridge in 1936, A. B. recalled that "I told my story the best I could and took them thru 176 Main Street where most of the antiques

were and showed them all the plans we had of this and that and in general, tried to get them acquainted with the Wells family. Finally the senior member didn't seem to warm up at all and we went to Mashapaug [CT] and saw my camp up there," a project, he recalls that "was finished with my money in the way that I wanted it and the senior member of this Boston firm of architects said that he thought it was one of

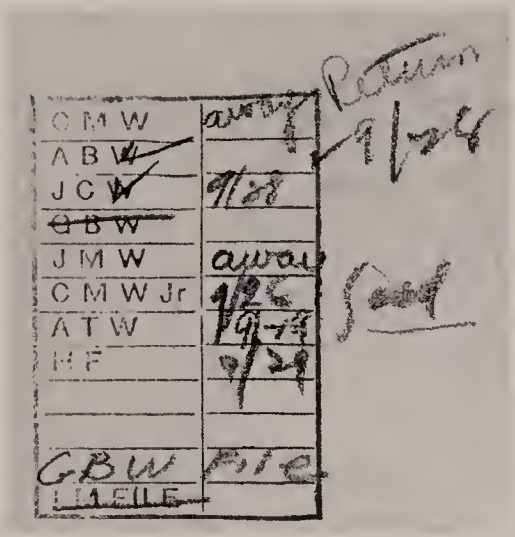


The notes for the meeting with architect Thomas Mott Shaw, September 23, 1936, in George B. Wells' hand, are among the first tangible evidences of the long, arduous process of bringing the founders' vision to life.

the finest jobs he had ever seen. He plainly said, right there and then, 'We will undertake to work with you and help your Village. A man who can do a job like this has vision and we are sure we can work with you.'"[31]

On the 23rd of September 1936, Albert, Cheney, and Channing, Gregory, Turner, and George met with the middle partner, Thomas Mott Shaw, to begin planning the process of reshaping the 200-year-old David Wight farm into a living Village setting for the collections. "We had a grand session last week with Mr. Shaw and I feel we are going to like our architects very much indeed," wrote A. B. shortly following the meeting. "Our job is an endless one and I hope the younger members of the family will pick it up where we leave off."[32]

In addition to the Rockefellers with their Williamsburg experience, to whom they turned for advice, the Wellses were watching with interest the course of museum development by other prominent American industrial families, in particular, the work of Henry Ford at Greenfield Village and Henry F. DuPont at Winterthur. In 1940, the Wellses sent the Museum's first curator, Malcolm Watkins, and the Superintendent of Construction, George



Developing, revising, and executing the plans was truly a family affair, formally documented in the routing slips attached to both project and personal correspondence, which kept everyone abreast of the Village's progress. *Initials top to bottom:* Channing M. Wells, Albert B. Wells, J. Cheney Wells, George B. Wells, John M. Wells, Channing M. (Gregory) Wells, Jr., Alfred Turner Wells, and Heywood Fox (husband of Channing's daughter Elizabeth).

Watson, on an expedition to Greenfield Village. The consensus in Sturbridge was that, while some exhibits caught their eye, they were not impressed by the great industrialist's major efforts of collecting and exhibiting. To these men accustomed to the rolling terrain of the New England countryside, it was the landscape and skyline that were missing. A. B. remarked to Malcolm following their return: "I am very much interested in what you write about your trip to Ford's Village, and you describe it just as I remember it; a cold, dreary, flat place. Nothing to tickle your heart or make you glad, and I think you have a wonderful expression, which I am going to quote: 'We all agree that what we learned from going there was principally what not to do.'"[33]

Other related developments also commanded their attention. George Wells read about Henry Ford's plans for the handicraft-based community of Ways, Georgia, in *The New York Times,* and wrote to the Superintendent of Ford Farms, J. F. Gregory, for information. The Wellses even looked at the nascent Vermont

J. Cheney Wells with business associates in Stockholm, September 1938 *(top).* During this trip to Sweden, Cheney visited Skansen, the world's first open-air museum, established in 1891. His photos were organized in a scrapbook *(bottom).*

Guild of Old Time Crafts and Industries, a project spearheaded by the proprietor of the Vermont Country Store, Vrest Orton. Living museums farther afield were also influential as evidenced by the photographs of the Swedish open-air museum of Skansen that Cheney shared with the family upon his return from an American Optical business trip to Stockholm.[34]

Reference to Ford and Rockefeller also abounded in conversations with architects and landscape architects when addressing the financial boundaries of the Village project: "I have tried to make the picture as plain as I can that we are not Henry Ford or John D. Rockefeller," A. B. wrote in 1945 in reference to John Radford Abbott, the architect of what is now the Bullard Tavern. "Not that we ever thought of doing what Rockefeller did in Williamsburg or Ford did in Dearborn," A. B. later acknowledged; "we simply haven't got that amount of money." Nor could Village development proceed as quickly as these earlier restoration efforts. "Of course this is a long job," A. B. wrote to a collector acquaintance in 1936. "We can't go at it the way Rockefeller or Ford did; we have to make a plan for twenty years, or thirty years, or more."[35]

Preliminary plans for the Village's Common and Mill Neighborhood, prepared by architects Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, December 9, 1936

By January of 1937, Perry, Shaw & Hepburn had prepared preliminary plans for the Common and the Mill Neighborhood, and in March of that year, Thomas Mott Shaw began to flesh out ideas for several buildings with drawings and plans. "Dear Father," wrote George B. Wells on April 13, 1937, "Mr. Shaw's colored sketch of the proposed Mansion House at the Museum, together with floor plan sketches, arrived here this morning. . . . Frankly, I am somewhat disappointed with the point of view that Mr. Shaw has taken, as it is rather extravagant and heavy." A. B. concurred, writing that "my criticism of Shaw's work up to date is that he is too much influenced by Williamsburg where he had all the money in the world there was to spend. Now with us, we haven't got it, and I think we can talk Mr. Shaw into this frame of mind . . . ." A. B. wrote to his brother Cheney later in the year, hoping "it will be possible for you to get Mr. Shaw to come up and take your automobile and drive around

Brick Mansion House sketch proposal for Old Quinabaug Village prepared by Thomas Mott Shaw, 1937

to see a few of the villages adjacent to Southbridge — Sturbridge, Brimfield, Woodstock, and any other small towns that may occur to you. My reason is that I would like to have Mr. Shaw visualize this section of New England, and give it serious consideration when planning our village Common and our village Main Street." While the architect failed to change his vision for the museum and the relationship was dissolved amicably in 1938, the brief flirtation helped clarify what the Village *was* to become by establishing very clearly how it *was not* to be shaped.[36]

In 1937, the Wells brothers retained Boston landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff to help them realize their vision for the Village. "Arthur A. Shurcliff is the best known landscape man in New England," A. B. remarked in 1945. "At the present time he has charge of all the landscaping, etc. at Williamsburg, Virginia. He doesn't look for jobs, they come to him. He has more than he can possibly do. We have

Channing Wells, J. Cheney Wells, and A. B. Wells discuss Village plans in the Miner Grant Store with landscape architect Arthur Shurcliff *(seated at right)* in the spring of 1941

Grading the Village Common, October 8, 1937

Note in upper right-hand corner the "New York" Barn frame being re-erected. Writing to Margaret Shurcliff in 1948, A. B. observed that "The Common isn't flat Margaret, Arthur Shurcliff doesn't do things that way. It is rolling, not so that you would particularly notice it but it would be there."[39]

known him for a good many years, we like him, and are extremely friendly; he is the most interesting person, besides knowing his business." "I can't help but take my hat off to him when it comes to vision, experience, and 'know-how'," A. B. reminisced again in 1947. "He had so much experience, and was the type of man who tried to live up to the motto 'Make No Little Plans'." Wrote Channing a year later, "We all loved Arthur Shurcliff and what a good time we had consulting with him and working from his drawings and his advice."[37]

In the spring of 1937, Albert wrote to his son, George, that "I don't expect to spend very much time in that office this summer and in my opinion neither will Uncle Cheney. We will be spending a great deal of time up at the Wight Farm discussing pro and con what to do and I think that we are going to have the time of our lives. I am very delighted that both of your uncles are so enthusiastic about the proposition and I do hope that we will have a good open summer so that we can do a lot of planning and be sure that what we do is right and then go ahead."[38]

"Well, we went to work, worked hard and talked a lot. We put down a lot of stakes and moved a lot of soil and there were a few plans made," A. B. later wrote of that first summer's work. The Common, as initially laid out by Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, was first lengthened and then graded by Arthur Shurcliff; the "New York" (later Gebhardt, then Parsonage) Barn was raised on the Common; and the saw and grist mills were undergoing construction. Among the summer's most impressive projects was the rebuilding of the dam and spillway on

Raising the frame of the Schoharie, New York, Barn on the Village Common, October 1937

"When it came to the Village, the New York barn was my baby," wrote A. B. to Ruth Wells in July 1947. "I went crazy about that barn when I saw the timbers . . . ."[41]

the Quinebaug River, following their unfortunate and costly demise during the flood of 1936. As A. B. surveyed the flood's damage, he was not daunted. When he showed his son the new dam construction site in July of 1937, George Wells was aghast at the enormity of the undertaking and implored his father to abandon that part of the project, recalled George Watson. A. B. persisted, knowing the importance of a steady head of water for the Village mills.[40]

A. B. Wells examines the remains of the Village dam following the 1936 flood

"In the winter or fall of '36 the whole shebang, not being far enough along, washed out," recalled A. B. in 1945. "Cheney and I used to figure that we saw $30,000 go down the Quinebaug River, leaving nothing but a hole. But we were not dismayed nor discouraged and started again in '37 to do a good job . . . ."[42]

A. B. and George Wells survey the site of the new Quinebaug River dam construction during July 1937

Detailed memoranda written by Cheney, Albert, and their nephew-in-law, Heywood Fox (husband of Channing's daughter Elizabeth), indicate that the Wells family members closely monitored the progress of work as their Village was taking form. Their command of engineering principles and of the intricacies of hydrology was impressive. It is clear that all family members involved were still imbued with the work ethic they had learned from an earlier generation of executives and planners — from George Washington Wells and Daniel Burnham. Writing to his good friend George W. Wells in 1911, Burnham had said: "I think work is what we need, at our age just as well as at any other age. Good nice work and plenty of it. I am sure I would have Wolly woggles, or something, if I let up. But I couldn't — the game is too much fun to be missed." A quarter century later, in 1937, A. B. wrote to Cheney that he was looking forward to getting back from California to "put my shoulder to the wheel and help to see real progress made in Quin[a]baug Village this coming year."[43]

On the 18th of June 1938, Albert Wells was a featured speaker at the Bicentennial Celebration of the town of Sturbridge. He shared his vision of the Village-to-be with the assembled crowd and noted that "before the end of the summer the pond will be full of water again and we hope that the gristmill may be ready to operate." By 1939, the working Gristmill would become the museum's first operating exhibit, and a boyhood memory would be made real again. For A. B. had recalled seeing David Wight's gristmill in operation on the site where the Village's reconstruction was being built: "when I was a boy and spent my summers up at Brimfield up at Porter Parker's farm, I drove a horse with corn to this grist mill and saw it ground."[44]

Gristmill at Old Sturbridge Village, c. 1941

"We have been doing a considerable amount of restoration work on the water privileges and have rebuilt the spillway and the dams by the sawmill and the gristmill," noted A. B. in June 1938. "It is our hope that we will be able to operate this mill again in the not too distant future . . . ."[46] The following year, the Gristmill became the museum's first operating exhibit.

On July 15, 1938, the vision took institutional form. The Quinabaug Village Corporation was formed in order "to establish, maintain, and operate a model village wherein shall be exhibited and carried on for the educational benefit of the public specimens and reproductions of New England architecture and antiquities, the arts, crafts, trades, and callings prior to the period of industrial expansion in New England"[45] — a vision statement that essentially holds true over six decades later. The incorporators of Quinabaug Village included Albert B. Wells, J. Cheney Wells, George B. Wells, Heywood Fox, Channing M. Wells, John H. Hardin (a close family friend, with the local firm of F. A. Hardy and Company), and John M. Wells.

A statement of purpose written in 1939 expands the vision:

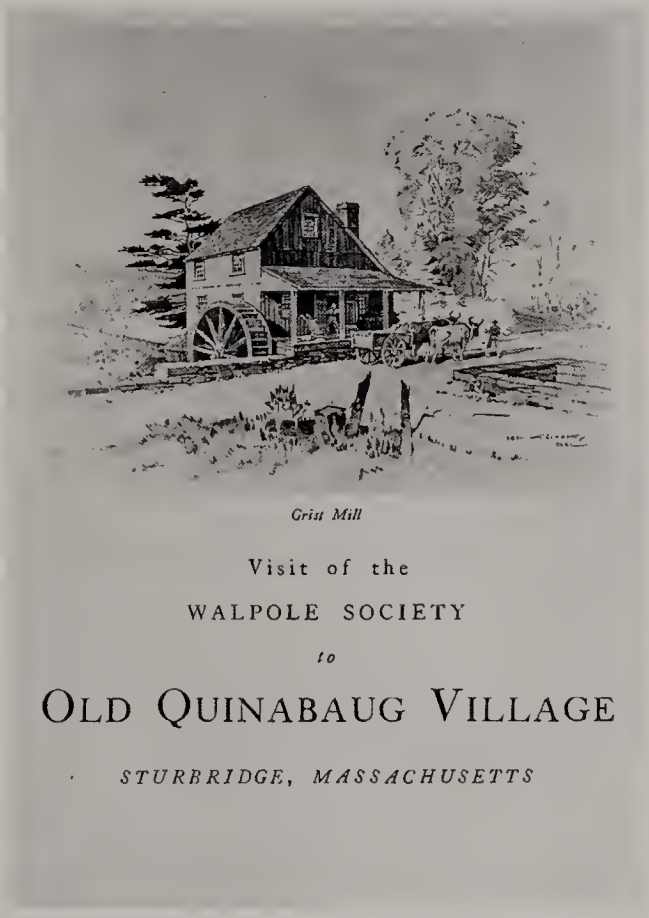
> "The Village will be in a sense a laboratory in which the heritage of the past will be distilled to separate out the practices, the customs, the values, which will have use and meaning in the present. What at the outset is a matter merely of local history thus emerges as something basic to human life everywhere. In the last analysis, the Village's mission will be to show that a satisfying, fruitful, and well-balanced existence can still be lived by the humblest of us even in a world of change and confusion."[47]

This expanded rationale is similar in many ways to those developed for the other major history museums created by Rockefeller, Ford, and DuPont. All shared a concern with preserving and cherishing pieces of the past against the powerful currents of change in 20th-century America, currents that threatened to carry away everything old.

The museum's purpose was refined still further in the statement prepared for the visit of the Walpole Society in September 1941:

> "Old Quinabaug Village will be a living museum where the arts and industries of early rural New England will be preserved and taught anew. . . . The basic purpose of the Village . . . will be to preserve the ever-good things of New England's past in a manner that will teach their usefulness to the people of the present and the future. By 'good things' of the past is meant not merely antique objects, but rather everything these objects imply — how they were made, how they were used, what the people and conditions of life were that made them necessary and influenced their designs; above all, how virtues and ideals expressed in them can be applied to life and work today. . . . The main purpose of the Village, thus, is educational."[48]

"It is really going to be a Village for the young people, the people who are now in their teens, and the children who are growing up. To give them a live picture of what their fore-fathers had about 1800 . . . that is, to me, the important part of Old Quinabaug," A. B. underscored in a 1945 letter to a collector friend. Indeed, as Curator Malcolm Watkins would later write, this was "a museum the exact likes of which had never before existed."[49]



Pamphlet prepared for the visit of the
Walpole Society to Old Quinabaug Village,
September 23-25, 1941

"I don't suppose you have a copy of the pamphlet that was prepared at the time the Walpole Society came to town," A. B. wrote to J. C. in January 1946, "but I reviewed this pamphlet with Ruth, and I told her that as far as I was concerned, and I felt quite sure that as far as you were concerned, it was still our bible."[50]

"The Village is progressing, but very slowly," observed A. B. Wells in October 1939. "The floods and hurricane of last year caused quite a set-back, and much extra work in the way of flood-control, etc., had to be done. For this reason there has not been much building so far. The common has been graded and some roads laid out. The old sawmill was the first to be completed, and now the grist mill is finished and operating. At present, an old house from Willimantic is being re-erected on the common. . . . Beyond this there is little of interest to the visitor." The "old house from Willimantic," the Fitch House, was the first dwelling to become a

Thousands of board feet of "hurricane lumber," cut from trees felled during the 1938 storm, are stacked near a temporary sawmill by the Oliver Wight House, c. 1939

The flood damage wrought by the 1938 hurricane at the Village and at the American Optical Company plant in Southbridge was extensive. Wrote A. B. to Margaret Shurcliff in 1948, "in '38 we had the biggest flood that anyone living had ever seen, or had happened in a hundred years. We had a repetition, you might say, of the previous [1936] flood and that time it cost us even more money."[51]

Fitch House *(left)* under construction, 1939; across the Common *(right)* sits the "New York" Barn; the newly constructed Gristmill is seen between the two

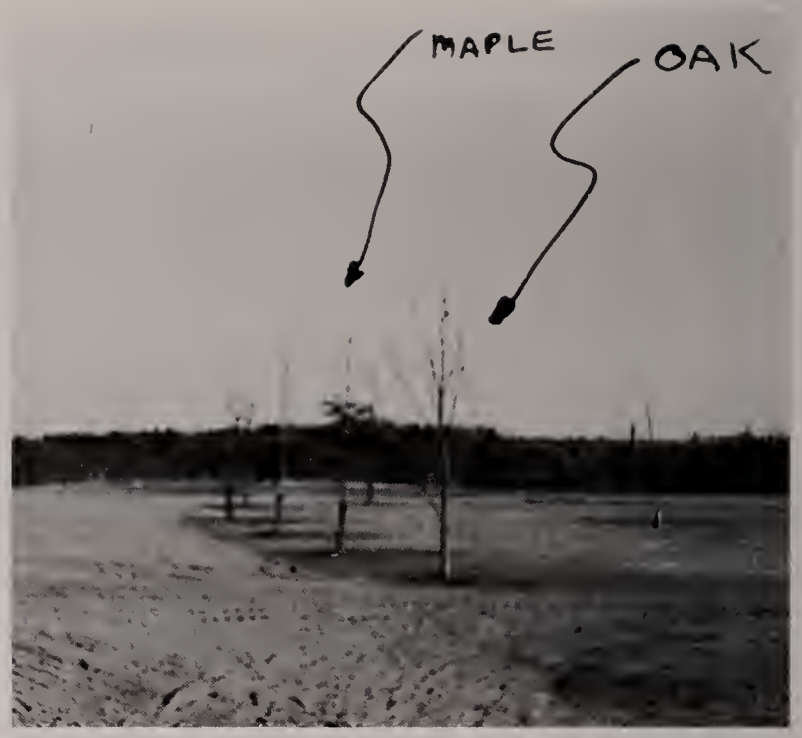
part of the Village landscape. In the fall of 1939, A. B. began the process of transforming it from house to home, as he suggested the first furnishings plan for a Village structure. "I do not think that in this house we should put any very valuable pieces of furniture," he wrote to Curator Malcolm Watkins in October 1939. "I bought a new kitchen dresser down in Framingham the other day that may be all right for height; possibly it is a little too high. . . . It is furniture of this type that I think should go in the Fitch House. I also bought a blanket chest that I would like to see there, and you have pieces of furniture we bought from Mr. Nash that I think would go in fine."[52]

A. B. had a special place in his heart for decorating interiors, well-expressed in the conclusion of a long letter written in September 1936 to a gentleman in Evanston, Illinois, who

The main "red" kitchen of the Fitch House, October 1941, its furnishing scheme guided by A. B.'s hand

was incorporating into his home some English furniture A. B. had sold him. "This really makes me laugh," Albert wrote; "a hard-headed manufacturer trying to tell a man how to furnish a house, but I just love to do it better than anything else." For Village houses, A. B. was concerned about interior finish at an extraordinary level of detail in terms of plaster, baseboards, window treatments, and flooring. This is reflected in his letter to Cheney in January 1941 regarding the "Salt Box" or Richardson House (now Parsonage), its re-erection opposite the Fitch House then nearly complete.[53]

"Salt Box" House nearing completion, winter 1940 – 1941



Trees on the Village Common, November 28, 1939

"Very pleased to hear about the planting, and I hope sometime you will send me some photographs of it," wrote A. B. Wells to Old Quinabaug Village Superintendent of Construction George Watson on the 21st of November 1939.[54] In response, Watson took, marked, and sent this image for A. B.'s review.

Indeed, A. B., J. C., and other Wells family members were keenly interested and intimately involved in all the aspects of reshaping the Wight farm site into an early 19th-century village, literally from the ground up. "I am delighted to hear about the oak trees and maples, and I hope we can do more of that," A. B. Wells wrote to George Watson on November 21, 1939. "As I wrote to Mr. JC in a previous letter, I am anxious

Skeleton frame for the Gun Shop
(now Firearms, Fibers & Fashion exhibit), summer 1941

Referring to the advantage wooden frames offered in visualizing the massing and "skyline" of the Village's structures, A. B. dictated the following to Ruth Wells in May 1948: "Instantly you can tell. That's the reason we used to make those frames and set 'em up and see how they looked." A. B. underscored his planning strategy in a letter to Ruth of August 3, 1948: "I don't care how high you place your ideals. You and I ought to know enough to do that. We can't be satisfied with 'good enough.' We must have the best. I mean by that — the lines of any building must be right; the location of any building must be right."[56]

that these trees should have branches down toward the ground, or small well shaped trees rather than tall bean pole ones." Six years later, in letters to Malcolm Watkins (July and September 1945), A. B. expressed his delight with the maturation of the Village landscape: "You would be dumbfounded to see how the trees have grown around the common. This year, especially, and, Malcolm, on the long road next to the salt box the trees on that side of the common will touch, in sight of two or three years, up in the air. . . . I can visualize how they will look ten years from now. It's going to be one of the most beautiful spots in this whole community."[55]

To help them visualize just how buildings would look and feel relative to each other and to the surrounding terrain, A. B. and his colleagues had wooden frames propped up in advance of construction to simulate the gable

ends of structures. This helped them create the kinds of aesthetically pleasing skylines A. B. had seen years earlier in Europe under Daniel Burnham's instruction. Allowing the exact massing and placement of buildings to be assessed, this technique was central to the methodical development of the Village's landscape during its early years and demonstrates the pains through which the founders attained the concrete expression of their vision.

Without Perry, Shaw & Hepburn or any other architect to guide them, this is how they accomplished the tasks of planning and constructing — deliberately, and with a tremendous amount of hard work. In September 1945, A. B. offered some advice to the head of a fledgling museum in upstate New York:

> "Let me tell you, that if you have the time, you will do it better than you could hire anybody to do it for you. You put more heart into it and you know what you want to accomplish. One of the discouraging things I have found in our Village is, first, to get a landscape architect who could put the time and hours of thought into it as you do yourself. Second, the architect is just exactly the same. If he is the man you want, he is so frightfully busy that he doesn't have time to give your project the thought and care that it does require. You have to do the work."[57]

Miner Grant Store, December 14, 1940

"The photographs of the Store are perfectly grand," A. B. wrote to Malcolm Watkins in December, "and I see that the chimney has sprouted through the roof. . . . What a lovely place to put a couple of old benches and they would look very swell I think."[58]

A. B. Wells in the Village's Mill Neighborhood near the "Blacksmith's House" (*left* – current location of the Bixby House) and "Miller's House" *(right)*, c. 1941 - 1945

"Doubtless the war situation will have some bearing on the course of the project in the future," A. B. predicted in 1939. Indeed it did, although developments continued through early 1942. In 1940, the Grant Store joined the Fitch and Salt Box houses on the Village Common. While several other museum buildings were built before mid-1942, construction and most other activity came to a standstill from then until the end of the war. "In the first place, you couldn't look at yourself in the mirror and justify taking labor and materials during the war period," A. B. wrote in 1944. During the war years, the quiet of the surrounding landscape was punctuated only by the visits of the Wells family and friends.[59]

A. B. Wells examining his wrought iron collection, newly installed in the Village's "Blacksmith's House," c. 1941 - 1945

The war ended in August of 1945, and "[a]fter depressions, floods, hurricanes, and finally war, you can at last look ahead with a pretty clear view," wrote Malcolm Watkins to A. B. in September. "I'll bet you are happy to see action in the Village once again, and I'm sure everybody else connected with it must feel that way too." A. B., himself, wrote that "it's time we really get to work. Ten years have passed since Cheney and I bought the property up there. Although we have done some work, there is still a vast amount to be done." One of the first post-war projects was to begin planning the Tavern. John Radford Abbott, a returning war veteran, was hired as the architect. In September of 1945, A. B. wrote to Malcolm Watkins that "My brother Channing suggested, why not use the big room at the Mashapaug Camp as the dining room for the Inn. Well, put that under your tongue and swing it around . . . ." (A. B. often showed a magical, even unique, way with the English language). He was soon delighted to learn that the Great Room from his Camp could indeed be incorporated into the Tavern design. "I can visualize what can be done," A. B. remarked to Rusty Kettell in October 1945. "I've had a fine summer playing with the project," he continued. "I wish I were ten years younger. It's going to be something to talk about one of these days."[60]

Site of the new Village Tavern, March 24, 1946
(Grant Store visible at left over rise)

"George Watson at the present time has skeleton forms up showing just how [the Tavern] would merge into the hillside between the New York barn and the river and I think it would be very lovely there," A. B. wrote to Malcolm Watkins on October 12, 1945.[61]

Although the Tavern would be completed in 1947, A. B. never saw his beloved Great Room transplanted to the sloping hillside at the

Cheney Wells in the Village Tavern sharing the woodenware collection with a visitor, May 5, 1948

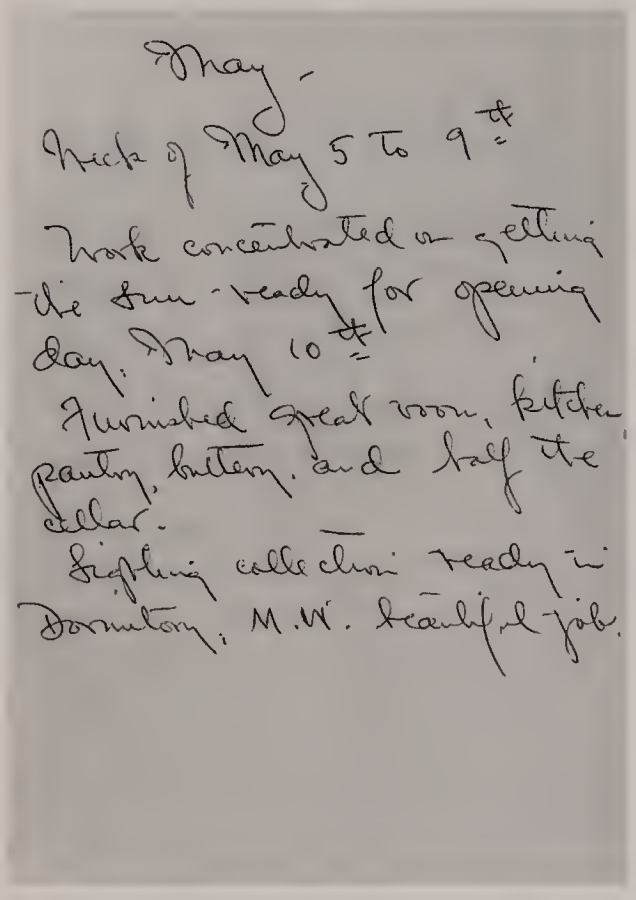
". . . We saw the Village grow and grow, you followed it practically daily so long as you were around, and I knew that it was in good hands and was just delighted to see what was going on, and have always taken great pride in it because I thought it was a beautiful plan," J. C. wrote to A. B. in January 1949. "We could see that [the Village] would be a perfect way to place your collection and mine where they would have the right kind of surroundings to be lasting, as well as appreciated. I think it has worked that way, and a great deal has been splendidly done."[63]

newly created Village. "In this year of 1945 the great blow struck," remembered Ruth Wells. "A. B. began to have heart trouble and it seemed that plans and construction for the Village might have to be abandoned for now. . . . [We] took him to California where [A. B. and Ethel] lived for the rest of their lives, and during the winter of '46 we got impassioned letters from [A. B.] asking us to do things at the Village. The letters were addressed to George, who was so busy at the A. O. that he asked me to go up to the Village to see about the details that A. B. was worrying about. After a month or two I was so fascinated that I couldn't stay away."[62]

A. B. cautioned Ruth in a letter of April 2, 1946: "I think it is grand of you to be willing to give it your personal time and thoughts, but Ruth, you must not make it a

Ruth Dyer Wells
1907 – 1989

job. You have a job, taking care of George and bringing up your three children. If this can be kind of a side show, all well and good." Ruth wrote back a week later: "We are going to keep a 'day book' and write in it all the things that occur and the decisions that have to be made." Those "things" and "decisions" turned out to be nearly all-consuming for Ruth, who propelled the Village to its opening. "We should like to open about the seventh or eighth of June, so that we can begin taking in some money; and it has all been worked out on the budget," she continued in that same letter. A. B. replied: "I realize today what a tremendous amount of work is ahead for somebody. If you will head up that job I have no question but what your Uncle Cheney will be glad to say 'Amen'. He certainly cannot do it or give it much more time than I can; certainly, I do not today think I should be on top of it and it can't stand still. The work can't stand still; it must progress . . . ."[64]


May -
Week of May 5 to 9th
Work concentrated on getting the Inn ready for opening day, May 10th
Furnished great room, kitchen pantry, bottom, and half the cellar.
Lighting collection ready in Dormitory; M.W. beautiful job.

Ruth Wells' entries in Village "day book," week of May 5 – 9, 1946

Channing also replied on the 16th of April 1946, as he was visiting in California and had read Ruth's letter:

> "We in the family realize better than others how great a part of Albert's life has been put into the Village the last few years, but the last year or two he has commenced to worry about it, and especially since he was ill last winter. And, therefore, the interest that you both are taking now comes at a wonderful time, and will do a great deal I am sure to lessen his anxiety about the future. If there is anything that will keep him

from worrying, it will help him to regain again his full strength and vigor and the joy he deserves from the development of this project. I know that the reason you have taken hold of this, Ruth, is just what I said and because you want him to have the pleasure which he deserves out of this when he gets home again. I don't see myself how in the world you can do it with all of your home, family and civic activities, but your letter shows you have a wonderful grasp of the situation, and with it, which I think pleases Albert, I know it does me, that most of all you are getting very interested in it yourself, and that is what the undertaking needs and will need in the years to come. Its success depends upon these personal interests of some one and I can see signs already on the part of your children in their love for being up there. That will insure its future and will be a tremendous comfort to your father and mother, particularly at this time. . . . The next to the last paragraph in your letter pleases me more than anything, let me quote: 'I do hope we can all work together and make this Village the living thing that it ought to be and has the potentials for being.'"[65]

Channing's sentiments were also strongly echoed on his copy of Ruth's letter, on which he had underlined the phrase "living thing" and had pencilled in the word "RIGHT."

Channing M. Wells
1870 – 1959

Ruth had shared with A. B. her concern about the name of the Village in a letter of April 9, 1946:

> "One of the things that I think is very important to get a decision on is changing the name of the Village [from Old Quinabaug Village]. . . . It is very confusing to most people, and a great many of them go to Quinabaug, Connecticut, having looked it up on the map. Whereas, if we called it Old Sturbridge Village, the confusion would be eliminated. I, personally, would like to have the name of Wells in the title somewhere to perpetuate the work and ideals that you and Uncle Cheney have worked so hard for. My suggestion would be Wells Village, or Old Sturbridge Village. Will you let me know of your thoughts and decision on this as soon as possible?"[66]

The letter was circulated to Cheney and Channing, and all agreed to forego a family namesake in favor of "Old Sturbridge Village." The name change was approved by the Sturbridge selectmen, and Opening Day was set for Saturday, June 8th. Admission was $1 per person, and 81 visitors toured the Village, driving their cars around the grounds. "My mother was wardrobe mistress," Ruth recalled, "and I know that the present Costume Department would have had a fit if they could have seen the 19th century finery taken out of attic trunks."[67]

OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

MUSEUM & CRAFTS CENTER

The Proprietors wish to announce to the public the opening of their new and improved MUSEUM and REPOSITORY of ancient and unusual objects, where LIVING DEMONSTRATIONS will be made DAILY, including the Sabbath, of the antique arts and trades.

They wish to bring to the public's attention that for ELEGANCE, BEAUTY, and CONVENIENCE, their museum is surpassed by few. Also that in its breadth and extent it comprises an ENTIRE VILLAGE, complete with dwellings, work-shops, mills, and a REAL MILL POND, fed by the Quinebaug River, justly famous throughout this region for its sylvan charms.

To those who study the life and history of our forefathers, the proprietors recommend Old Sturbridge Village as a place for their edification. For others, less erudite, they are confident that it will afford delightful entertainment to young and old.

Albert B. Wells
J. Cheney Wells
PROPRIETORS

NOTE: A splendid picnic ground is provided for those who wish to bring their lunch.

Compliments of
OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE
June 26, 1946

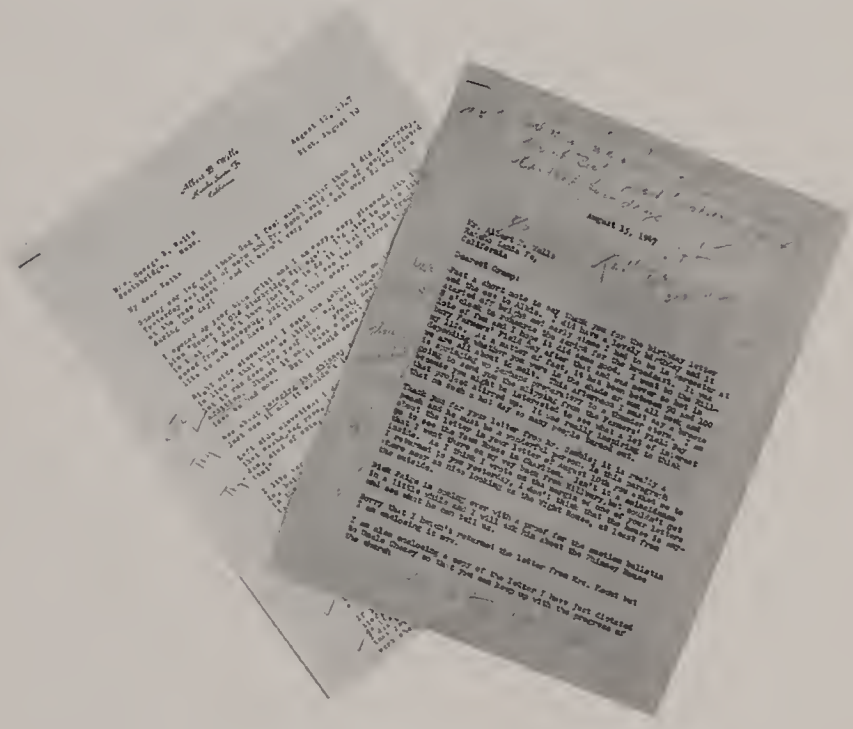
E. W. HALL,
Printer for the Village

Commemorative Village-opening broadsides such as this example of June 26 were printed in the Village's Print Shop between June 8 and 29, 1946.

Village hostess at the "Salt Box" House, June 1946

"'Gramps' was terribly worried and we wrote reams to each other on every detail," remembered Ruth. "Personally, I can't bear the idea of your not being here . . ." she wrote to A. B. "It doesn't seem possible that I can get through the summer without having your advice on the spot." The long-distance correspondence was also difficult for A. B. "I would give a great deal to be able to sit down and have a short talk with you," he later wrote. "I wish we could talk an hour a day. I can tell a story better than I can write; there would be questions from you as we went along that I could answer . . . ."

Nonetheless, they were able to exchange ideas, advice, and information, and by season's end, the new museum had welcomed 5,170 visitors. "The year's work had been accomplished because of the efficient, harmonious cooperation," wrote Ruth in her annual report. "The first year of our being a Museum, open to the public, is behind us, and we face 1947 in anticipation and hope."[68]



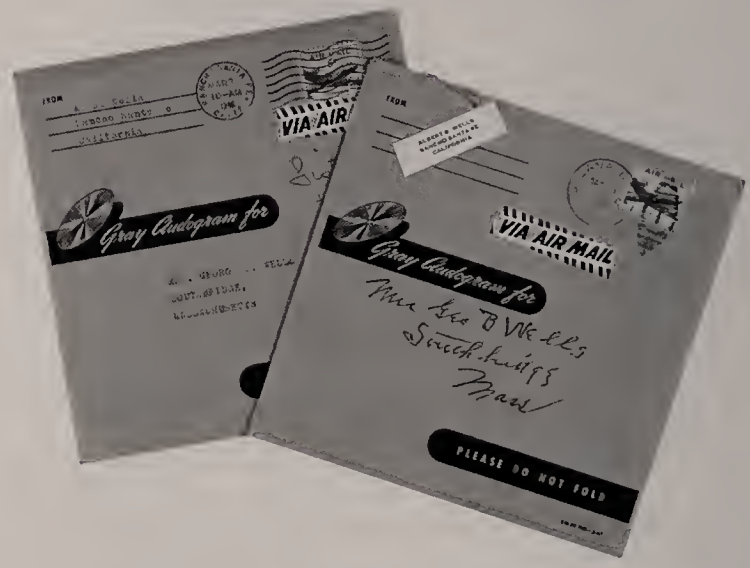
A sample of the voluminous correspondence between A. B. and Ruth Wells

A. B. was ever appreciative of remaining close to his dear Village through his daughter-in-law's letters and recordings: "I don't believe I can make you realize how much I enjoy this correspondence, and how much it helps to keep me alive and interested," he wrote to Ruth on the 11th of April 1947. "I know I should simply go nuts if it wasn't for you."[69]

Village administrative staff in 1948

Left to right: Joseph B. Hoyt, George Watson, Ruth D. Wells, Lorraine Russell Williams, Feralyn Watson, Maleolm Watkins, and Earl Brown

The transcontinental correspondence continued for the next couple of years, at times simply as Audograph recordings, as A. B. offered counsel and advice from afar. The talk was frank. "I feel we know each other well enough now to shoot from the shoulder and let the bullets hit where they like, and after all, it's your job, God bless you," he wrote to Ruth on December 18, 1947. "Now this letter, very likely, is going to make you mad, but get over it," A. B. wrote again the following December. "If I have been unjust in any way don't hesitate to tell me and I'll apologize." But A. B. was very complimentary about the job Ruth was doing. "I am so proud to think that you have such confidence in me," Ruth penned to A. B. in March 1947. "I only hope and pray that I will not let you down! . . . I think about Grandfather Burnham's 'Make No Little Plans' and I have it on my desk. I try always to think that way, but you have to be a 'big' person to have it come naturally the way D. H. B. and you do. Please bear with me while I get some more practice."[70]



Audograph recordings between A. B. Wells in Rancho Santa Fe, California, and Ruth Wells in Southbridge, 1948

"The thoughts come and flow into my mind and I like to let them out. . . . It is hard work for you, pounding them out yourself. Didn't I understand that you had one of these Audograph machines right there at your home?" A. B. queried Ruth in a dictated letter of April 28, 1948. "If you have, why don't we use it? We don't have to have those typed."[71]

Albert B. Wells
1872 – 1953

In January of 1949, Ruth received one of her last letters from her father-in-law. ". . . I hope sometime you will realize how much I appreciate what you have done for me," wrote A. B. "I hope that the sky is going to clear and you are going to find some way of carrying on Old Sturbridge Village," he continued, his letter reflecting concern for the young Village's economic future, in light of post-war inflation and the (fortunately short-lived) recession of late 1948.

> "But you are not to do the work: I would rather see it flop tomorrow than to tie you down for another three years of what you have been thru in the past three years. That is dead wrong. After all, it isn't your hobby; it has just become your hobby and you have worked like Hell to make it go, I think more on my account than on any other. I still think there may be a way and I do think you have picked up a lot of very valuable information. With a shrinking income and the purchasing power of the dollar going lower and lower, it is a damn tough outlook. Don't give up: I'm not. Lots of love. Yours, Gramps."[72]

While Ruth would soon step down as the museum's director, she did not depart until she and her husband George had thoughtfully laid the groundwork for the coming decades, reshaping the institution's organizational and strategic plans. Nor did she ever really retire from the Village. Ruth remained an ever-active, steadfast, and exuberant supporter, helping break new ground from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Ruth Wells at the dedication of the Village's first Herb Garden, 1953

"I realize that the hour glass is running out, and the job is on other shoulders," wrote A. B. in 1947. "Those shoulders are Ruth's. . . . She works like fury, and enthusiasm such as hers is needed to carry on."[73]

During the early years, three of the most important additions to the Village landscape had direct connections with the Wells family: the Center Meetinghouse, the Freeman Farm, and the Salem Towne House. The Meetinghouse, the Village's symbolic center, was discovered in nearby Fiskdale by Ruth Wells, who negotiated its nearly free donation (for a Hammond electric organ) and supervised its reassembly at the Village during 1947 and 1948. The building held a special family significance, for Mary McGregory Wells — the mother of A. B., J. C., Channing, and Mary— had attended Baptist services there when she was a young girl. ". . . I am . . . very pleased that you are going to move the Fiskdale church . . ." commented A. B. in July 1947. "It may be expensive but there are

Reassembly of the Center Meetinghouse, 1948

"Of course the Common was laid out to take into consideration the big Oak tree which will be in front or near the front of the church when located and built," recalled A. B. in 1947.[74]

Freeman Farmhouse and farm complex in its initial Village setting, c. 1953

"If I am rightly informed you are planning to establish a good size farm by the development of farm lands south of the Grist Mill and southwest of the Blacksmith Shop," wrote Arthur Shurcliff to Ruth Wells in December 1948. "The sight of tilled ground, meadows, live stock in the fields and standing crops of corn, wheat, rye and other farm produce will help vastly as backstage scenery for the Old Village."[76] Following a disastrous flood in 1955, the farm complex was relocated to its present site.

two sides to that. The church has a background that no amount of money can pay for."[75] Ruth Wells had also been advocating for a farming exhibit as early as 1946, and in 1950, the Board of Trustees accepted plans for a New England farm complex to be donated by George, Ruth, and their children. The Pliny Freeman Farmhouse, centerpiece of the farm, was moved from its original location in Sturbridge into the Village in November of 1950 and opened as an exhibit in 1952. A Mansion House was envisioned from the Village's beginning; it was

first proposed by Perry, Shaw & Hepburn in 1937 — and later rejected by the Wellses — as a brick, heavily Williamsburg-influenced structure. It was considered in various forms in the intervening years, and in 1952 a final decision was made to develop this crucial balancing element at the opposite end of the Common from the Meetinghouse. With the very active support of J. Cheney Wells and his wife, Marion, the Salem Towne House from nearby Charlton, known to members of the Wells family as early as 1937, was purchased, moved in 1952, and restored in 1955. Its splendid gardens and landscape were designed by Sydney Shurcliff, son of the Wells family's long-time friend Arthur Shurcliff.

Salem Towne House and Gardens, May 1956

"I visualize some time, when the Mansion House is built, a reasonably wide hallway . . . would run right thru, and there'd be a fine door at each end. One in which you'd enter, the other to look out from, toward the pond," A. B. wrote to Ruth in July 1947.[77]

On the 13th of July 1953, Massachusetts Governor Christian A. Herter spoke at a ceremony marking the symbolic transfer of the museum to the people of New England:

> "This particular occasion, marking as it does, the transition in a very great educational and cultural development from one which has been carried and developed largely by the Wells family to one which I know will be very easily and successfully carried out by the people of New England as a whole — is an important moment in transition. I know something of the history of Old Sturbridge Village. I predict for it a great future. The fact that 100,000 people a year are coming here to see what has been developed largely through the generosity and genius of one family, gives, it seems to me, a wonderful augury of the future of this whole development."[78]

George Wells, in his comments at the ceremony, noted: "We had visitors in Southbridge, but when we got up here in Sturbridge, we found we had a great many more visitors. We found that the Village created a very deep public interest that we never expected. I am frank in saying that I never dreamt that anything like this was going to happen and I am sure that father never thought of it either, but it's true."[79]

Indeed, four years later, in 1957, the Village welcomed its one-millionth visitor. As the Village "grew and proved worthy of the

Celebration of the one-millionth visitor to Old Sturbridge Village, in the Salem Towne House, July 1957

interest of educators and historians," wrote Ruth Wells in 1949 to the eminent clergyman and author of the day Harry Emerson Fosdick, "it became increasingly evident that we were creating something of real stature. . . . We are not satisfied to use the Village solely to do honor to the past," she continued, "but as a source of strength in the present and for the future."[80]

A quarter century later, on the 21st of January 1974, at the dedication of the museum's new Education Building, Ruth reflected upon her association with Old Sturbridge Village:

> "I start with George Wells because the idea of the Village was his in the first place and if he hadn't made it possible for me to 'carry on' after his father became ill and his uncle moved to New York, I imagine the dream would have ended right there in 1945. . . . I'm one of the team, and I'm so thankful that I had sense enough to realize what a privilege it was to be able to take part in helping the great idea of the Village to come to fruition. No thanks for that . . . because I'm perfectly sure that the good Lord had his hand on my shoulder most of the time."

Regarding the new teaching facility, Ruth again spoke of her husband: "George had wanted to be a teacher and writer and so it was natural for him to think about what we were teaching about history and the people who lived in a Village like ours. He was concerned about developing a program here for children, one that would give them an experience that would help them understand what work and family and community are all about. . . . This is a great moment of celebration for me," she concluded, "the triumphant climax of a plan to create a 'Beacon' to light the path toward the joyful experience of learning about the world we live in."[81]

George Burnham Wells
1902 – 1967

While the founders of this remarkable Village have passed on, their enduring vision is ever-vibrant. It is documented not only in the letters and memos, scratchy recordings and faded Kodachromes in the museum archives, but it resonates through the houses and shops, the fields and pastures of the Village landscape, and the skillful presentation of its staff. Perhaps most significantly, it is reflected back to us through the wonderment in the eyes of a child, for whom history has truly "come to life."

And we, as stewards of the vision, are challenged and inspired by D. H. Burnham's words, which echoed so brilliantly among Chicago's skyscrapers nearly a century ago:

"Make no little plans, they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with evergrowing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty."

Daniel H. Burnham

Old Sturbridge Village Collections

Notes

All images are from the Old Sturbridge Village Research Library and Archives, with the following exceptions: the photographs on pages 12 and 15 are from Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, Planner of Cities*, II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), 40 and 154, respectively; and the photograph on page 14 was published in Thomas Hines, *Burnham of Chicago, Architect and Planner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 265. We have made our best efforts to contact the copyright holder for this last early photograph; any information relating to the image would be greatly appreciated.

The following abbreviations are used to identify individuals and collections frequently cited in the notes:

ABW	Albert B. Wells
ABWC	Albert B. Wells Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Archives
AIC	Letterpress Copybooks, Daniel H. Burnham Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Library Archives, Art Institute of Chicago
B , F	Box and Folder
DHB	Daniel H. Burnham
GBW	George B. Wells
GWC	George Watson Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Archives
JCW	J. Cheney Wells
OSV	Old Sturbridge Village Archives
QVCC	Quinabaug Village Corporation Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Archives
RDW	Ruth D. Wells
RDWC	Ruth D. Wells Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Archives
WHMC	Wells Historical Museum Collection, Old Sturbridge Village Archives

1. C. Malcolm Watkins, "Old Sturbridge Village: Beginnings, 1936 to 1948," (paper presented at the Old Sturbridge Village Antique Collector's Weekend, October 29, 1971), 17.

2. GBW, "Memories of My Parents and My Grandparents, Reminiscences of George B. Wells," (n.p., n.d.); Ruth Dyer Wells, *The Wells Family, Founders of the American Optical Company and Old Sturbridge Village* (Southbridge: 1979), 43.

3. GBW, "Memories".

4. Arthur Shurcliff to ABW, 24 November 1948, QVCC, B 2, F 21, p. 1.

5. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, QVCC, B 2, F 21, p. 7.

6. RDW, "Prologue to Slides," n.d., uncatalogued MS, OSV.

7. DHB to ABW, 4 August 1905, AIC.

8. DHB to ABW, 12 October 1903, AIC; ABW to RDW, 28 April 1948, RDWC, B 1, F 1, p. 7.

9. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 17 December 1948, QVCC, B 2, F 21, p. 6.

10. ABW to RDW, 1 May 1948, Audograph Recording, Audio Collection, OSV.

11. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 14 April 1945, GWC, B 1, F 5, p. 5.

12. DHB to ABW, 20 February 1912, AIC; ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 17 December 1948; ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948.

13. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 28 January 1945, GWC, B 1, F 5, p. 3.

14. ABW to Christine MacPherson, 27 January 1943, WHMC, B 2, F 23, p. 1.

15. RDW, "Prologue to Slides."

16. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 14 April 1945, p. 5.

17. Ibid.; ABW to Christine MacPherson; ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 17 December 1948, p. 4; ABW to Charles F. Brown, 28 January 1945, p. 3; RDW, "Prologue to Slides."

18. C. Malcolm Watkins, 2.

19. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 28 January 1945, p. 3.

20. ABW to Harry Davis Sleeper, 26 July 1932, ABWC, B 2, F 27, pp. 5, 4; ABW to Eleanor Hudson, 18 September 1936, ABWC, B 2, F 4, p. 2.

21. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 5 September 1944, GWC, B 1, F 5, p. 9; ABW to Russell Kettell, 7 August 1947, GWC, B 1, F 40, p. 1.

22. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 28 January 1945, p. 1; ABW to RDW, 26 May 1947, RDWC, B 1, F 1, p. 1; ABW to Eleanor Hudson, 18 September 1936, p. 6.

23. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 4.

24. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 17 December 1948, p. 4.

25. ABW to Henry Cady Wells, 10 January 1940, QVCC, B 2, F 21.

26. JCW to ABW, 9 January 1949, QVCC, B 2, F 14.

27. ABW to Christine MacPherson, 27 January 1943, p. 2.

28. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 5.

29. ABW and JCW, "Visit of the Walpole Society to Old Quinabaug Village, Sturbridge, Massachusetts," September 1941, OSV, p. 5.

30. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 6; GBW to John D. Rockefeller III, 15 July 1936, WHM, B 1, F 61, p. 1.

31. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 6.

32. ABW to Eleanor Hudson, 26 September 1936, ABWC, B 2, F 4, p. 1.

33. ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 10 December 1940, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 1.

34. GBW to J. F. Gregory, 15 March 1937, WHM, B 1, F 39, p. 2; Vrest Orton to ABW, 31 October 1940, WHM, B 1, F 74, p. 1.

35. ABW to Russell Kettell, 22 August 1945, ABWC, B 1, F 40, p. 1; ABW to Charles F. Brown, 14 April 1945, p. 4; ABW to Eleanor Hudson, 18 September 1936, p. 2.

36. GBW to ABW, 13 April 1937, WHM, B 1, F 61, p. 1; ABW to Heywood Fox, 3 December 1937, QVCC, B 3, F 56, p. 1; ABW to JCW, 7 October 1937, QVCC, B 3, F 56, p. 1.

37. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 14 April 1945, p. 3; ABW to RDW, 8 May 1947, QVCC, B 4, F 23, p. 2; ABW to RDW, 25 April 1947, RDWC, B 1, F 1, p. 1; quoted in ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 3.

38. ABW to GBW, 30 April 1937, WHM, B 1, F 61, p. 3.

39. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 17 December 1948, p. 7.

40. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 7; George Watson, interview by author, tape recording, Old Sturbridge Village, 15 August 1996.

41. ABW to RDW, 12 July 1947, ABWC, B 2, F 23, p. 1.

42. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 5.

43. DHB to ABW, 20 December 1911, AIC; ABW to JCW, 7 October 1937, QVCC, B 3, F 56, p. 2.

44. ABW typescript address, Sturbridge Bicentennial Celebration, 18 June 1938, QVCC, B 4, F 21, p. 10; ABW memo on Quinabaug Village, 14 December 1945, QVCC, B 4, F 4, p. 1.

45. Quoted in Ruth Dyer Wells, *The Wells Family*, p. 2.

46. ABW typescript address, Sturbridge Bicentennial Celebration, p. 10.

47. "Quinabaug Village, corrected draft for brochure," 22 May 1939, QVCC, B 4, F 2, p. 7.

48. ABW and JCW, "Visit of the Walpole Society," pp. 2 – 4.

49. ABW to Charles F. Brown, 14 April 1945, p. 4; C. Malcolm Watkins, 1.

50. ABW to JCW, 2 January 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, p. 3.

51. ABW to Margaret Shurcliff, 2 December 1948, p. 5.

52. ABW to Alvin Wortham, 25 October 1939, ABWC, B 2, F 22, p. 1; ABW to Alice Converse and Malcolm Watkins, 10 October 1939, ABWC, B 2, F 22, p. 2.

53. ABW to Lynn A. Williams, 5 September 1936, WHM, B 1, F 66, p. 2; ABW to JCW, 30 January 1941, QVCC, B 4, F 2.

54. ABW to George Watson, 21 November 1939, GWC, B 1, F 32, p. 1.

55. Ibid.; ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 10 September 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 1; ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 5 July 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 2.

56. ABW to RDW, 1 May 1948, Audograph Recording, Audio Collection, OSV; ABW to RDW, 3 August 1948, Audograph Recording, Audio Collection, OSV.

57. ABW to Roscoe W. Smith, 24 September 1945, WHM, B 1, F 75, p. 1.

58. ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 10 December 1940, p. 1.

59. ABW to Alvin Wortham, p. 1; ABW to Charles F. Brown, 5 September 1944, p. 1.

60. Malcolm Watkins to ABW, 3 September 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 1; ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 17 August 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 2; ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 10 September 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 5; ABW to Russell Kettell, 15 October 1945, GWC, B 1, F 40, pp. 1, 2.

61. ABW to Malcolm Watkins, 12 October 1945, WHM, B 3, F 46, p. 3.

62. RDW, "Prologue to Slides."

63. JCW to ABW, 9 January 1949, QVCC, B 2, F 14.

64. ABW to RDW, 2 April 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, p. 1; RDW to ABW, 9 April 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, pp. 1, 3; ABW to RDW, 12 April 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, p. 4.

65. Channing M. Wells to RDW, 16 April 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, pp. 1, 3.

66. RDW to ABW, 9 April 1946, p. 5.

67. RDW, "Prologue to Slides."

68. Ibid.; RDW to ABW, 23 April 1946, QVCC, B 4, F 10, p. 3; ABW to RDW, 12 July 1947, ABWC, B 2, F 23, p. 1; "Annual Report, Old Sturbridge Village," 1946, OSV.

69. ABW to RDW, 11 April 1947, QVCC, B 4, F 23, p. 5.

70. ABW to RDW, 18 December 1947, RDWC, B 1, F 1, p. 1; ABW to RDW, 17 December 1948, ABWC, B 2, F 23, p. 6; RDW to ABW, 15 March 1947, QVCC, B 4, F 11, p. 1.

71. ABW to RDW, 28 April 1948, RDWC, B 1, F 1, p. 6.

72. ABW to RDW, 3 January 1949, ABWC, B 2, F 23, p. 2.

73. ABW to Russell Kettell, 7 August 1947, GWC, B 1, F 40, p. 3.

74. ABW to RDW, 7 August 1947, QVCC, B 4, F 11, p. 2.

75. ABW to RDW, 12 July 1947, p. 3.

76. Arthur Shurcliff to RDW, 30 December 1948, QVCC, B 4, F 24, p. 5.

77. ABW to RDW, 31 July 1947, QVCC, B 4, F 11, p. 1.

78. "Ceremonies on the Acceptance by Governor Christian A. Herter, of the Transfer of Old Sturbridge Village to the People of New England," 13 July 1953, uncatalogued typescript, OSV, p. 4.

79. Ibid., p. 2.

80. RDW to Harry E. Fosdick, 4 April 1949, QVCC, B 1, F 26, pp. 1, 2.

81. RDW notes, "Dedication of Museum Education Center," 21 January 1974, RDWC, B 1, pp. 1, 2.

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